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The Landscape: Skamania County

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Skamania County

The Other Side of the River

by Michael Burnham

It's dusk in mid-December, and the sidewalks of downtown are bathed in the soft glow of holiday decorations and foggy windows.

Kristina Heartman, owner of Lesley's Books on the main drag, said she earns enough money to keep the lights on, but business could be better. Like other Columbia River tourist towns, Stevenson sees its share of empty shops, tables and hotel rooms amid this Great Recession. Luckily, books appear to be both recession-proof and weather-proof this wet winter.

"Everyone else around here says things have been a bit slower," Heartman recalled, "but when it gets darker earlier and the nights get longer and colder, people remember that they might want to read. Books might seem like the last thing you think about buying in this economy, but for something that's extraneous, I'm doing okay."

Skamania, the word from which this rural county gets its name, is Chinookan for "swift water." The river is no longer wild, tamed by the hulking Bonneville Dam, half-a-dozen miles downstream from Stevenson, but the view is still stunning on a winter's day. A dusting of snow caps craggy peaks that rise along both sides of the water as it flows toward the Pacific Ocean. Mount St. Helens is a frosted bunt cake, 30 miles to the northwest.

Such beauty is a blessing and a curse for Skamania County. For millennia, American Indians fished for plentiful salmon

and traded on the banks of the Columbia. The Oregon Trail eventually brought a steady slew of soldiers, loggers and homesteaders, including the Stevenson family for which the county seat is named. Just 5 percent of the 1,684-square-mile county is developable today. The rest of the land — part of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area and Gifford Pinchot National Forest — remains mostly wild.

In good times, the raw beauty draws a steady stream of tourists who stay at Skamania Lodge and shop down the hillside in Stevenson, the county's biggest town, with 1,400 people. The rural lifestyle keeps professionals from the Portland-Vancouver metroplex coming back, season after season. Some folks never leave, said Casey Roeder, executive director, Skamania Chamber of Commerce, in Stevenson. Some, like Heartman, make a go at running a small business on 2nd Street, downtown. Some try telecommuting from their homes. The vast majority climb in a car several days a week and drive.

And there's the rub: About seven in ten people who live here work outside of the county, Roeder noted. "Those people who are working in Portland — they're buying their groceries and their gas there," she explained. "That's a great loss for our local businesses that offer the same services. We need opportunities to have those people live and work here."

Curbing Commuting

Portland is but one of several places Ska-



Downtown Stevenson, Washington.



Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center Museum.



mania's residents go to work, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. About 19 percent worked in neighboring Clark County, Wash., and more than 9 percent worked in Multnomah County, Ore., in 2008, the most recent year for which data are available. Other Skamania County residents worked in farther-flung places, including Marion County, Ore., and Yakima County, Wash.

On weekday mornings and evenings, Washington State Route 14, which doubles as 2nd Street in downtown Stevenson, is packed with car commuters and other travelers. "It can take a while to cross the street," bookstore owner Heartman said. "In the summer, it can take forever." But that's in good times, of course.

As the economic downturn continues to take its toll on Skamania County's tourism industry, county boosters are trying to diversify the local employment mix. They're even treating Portland as an asset. "What we we're trying to capitalize on is our proximity to Portland, especially to the airport, and year-round recreation," said chamber director Roeder. "These are the kinds of things we have to offer to any kind of business."

The Skamania County Commission is working closely with the county's Economic Development Council to improve everything from roads to high-speed Internet infrastructure to attract and keep light-industrial companies that are looking for low costs and skilled laborers. County boosters have scored modest victories.

In 2009, Bingen, Wash.-based Insitu Inc., a Boeing Corp. subsidiary that makes unmanned, drone aircraft, opened a manufacturing site in Stevenson. The facility employs about 100 people.

With another 600 of its workers scattered throughout the Columbia River Gorge, Insitu plans to consolidate its op-

erations. Skamania County has proposed three sites for a new company campus, including one in the town of North Bonneville, Roeder said. Renewable energy is another employment sector on county leaders' wish list.

Binjen-based SDS Lumber Co. has applied to build 50 wind turbines atop a ridge it owns in eastern Skamania County. The 75-megawatt project, which would cover about 1,100 acres, would be located outside of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area.

Growth Projections

The county's economic diversification efforts come amid slow-and-steady population growth. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, in 2010 Skamania had 10,894 people, up from 9,872 people in 2000 and 8,289 people in 1990. State demographers project that the county will have about 13,400 people in 2030, up about 21 percent from 2000. As a point of reference, the state is expected to grow about 25 percent during the same 30-year period, to about 8.5 million residents.

Stevenson bookstore owner Heartman said she would like to see more people open independent businesses downtown. She would also like to see more major employers set up shop throughout the county to buffer her business and others during economic doldrums. "It would be nice to have more jobs that offer higher incomes, rather than just service-industry jobs," she added.

DeWees, who works in a flower shop a few doors down, said she'd like to see fewer locals leaving town every morning, too. Perhaps then, they'll have time more time to read a book — and maybe stop and smell the roses. "I used to work in Portland four days a week," she said, "but I decided it was a little too much [commuting]." **M**